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AUTHOR Smith, Eugene
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ABSTRACT

Reflecting the reader-response theory of literature--a theory suggesting that literature is made dynamic through interaction between reader and text--this report presents ways of extending high school students' imaginative grasp of human experience. Using three works--Randall Jarrell's poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Ambrose Bierce' short story, "The Coup de Grace," and Stephen Crane's novel, "The Red Badge of Courage"--this report shows how reading, discussing, and writing on these works can help students connect literary and personal experiences. It suggests that discussion should begin only after the entire work is read and that teacher questions, whether aimed at comprehension or personal reactions, should serve as starters for exploration rather than occasions for testing recall or attentiveness. Furthermore, the report suggests that student writing, from initial draft, to sharing with peers, to final revision, should help students relate experiences in the novel with their own lives. (MM)

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THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM AS A COMMUNITY OF INTERPRETERS

Eugene Smith

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THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM AS A COMMUNITY OF INTERPRETERS

Eugene Smith
University of Washington

Most of the high school English teachers I know took their undergraduate degrees at least ten years ago, when college literature courses tended to be taught according to principles of the New Criticism. Elements of literary technique were emphasized, with details about the author's life and about tne historical period either suppressed or regarded as only marginally relevant to proper, rigorous reading of text.

As a consequence of sitting in courses where literature was treated as object suitable for dissection, teachers-to-be often carried that approach into their own high school classes. Plot, character, theme, and symbol became the benchmarks for planning lessons, conducting class discussions, and formulating writing assignments. High school students, the assumption had it, could be inducted into the understanding and higher enjoyment of literature by practicing, even in diluted form, the types of exegesis that prevailed in college English departments.

But by the 1970's the New Criticism had lost its hegemony as the dominant critical theory. Structuralism from Europe and Deconstructionism in Europe and the United States were two of the competing approaches advocated by literary critics, at least for purposes of written criticism. Other ways of speaking and writing about literature were at least being tolerated in college English departments.

One of the most promising of these, as far as high school literature teachers and classes are concerned, is reader-response criticism.[1] Though not always called that, it has at least a forty-year history in the United States. Louise Rosenblatt published Literature as Exploration in 1938, articulating the belief that the experience of reading literature should be an intense form of personal activity, not a passive absorption of information about literary technique and of interpretations whose validity was largely dependent upon a teacher's assertion and superior knowledge. Although Rosenblatt was very influential with her students--prospective and practicing teachers of English in the eastern United States--and with some members of the National Council of Teachers of English, few of her ideas penetrated the minds of textbook writers or makers of local curricula.

In the early 1970's, Alan Purves tried to demonstrate an application of Rosenblatt's ideas with what he called a response-centered literature curriculum. In How Porcupines Make Love, he addressed teachers provocatively and with the heady confidence of the values upheavals from the '60's, urging them to stimulate and enliven response by using film, collage, drama, informal talk, and free forms of writing. He also edited the Ginn junior-senior high school literature series Responding, which put these ideas into lesson-sized form. Nothing could be farther from the New Criticism in both method and intent.

In the present more cautious, sometimes repressive, times, Purves's enthusiasm probably seems naive or at least inappropriate. Yet there are less flamboyant methods that

teachers can use to keep literature study from becoming a desiccated version of the New Criticism. And an understanding of these methods might well begin with a central question for any teacher of literature: Where does the literary work exist? Is it the actual print of the novel, short story, or poem? Is the text itself the work of literature?

Or does the literary work exist in the mind and imagination of each reader--a somewhat different work for each reader, depending on that reader's non-literary experience, sophistication in reading, and ability to enter a text imaginatively? Reader-response theory suggests that it is, indeed, in the interaction between text and reader that the literary work assumes its dynamic existence, so that The Red Badge of Courage or "Auto Wreck" is not the same work for any two readers or even the same work on successive readings by one individual.

If this sounds hopelessly "subjective" and antithetical to any concept of "better" or "worse" readings of a text, let us not dismiss the premise too soon as foolish. It forces us to specify what we denote by the term, "meaning in literature." Whereas some critics like E.D. Hirsch assert that the validity of meaning in a work of literature can be found only by knowing the author's intention, the reader-response critic claims that we can never really know the author's intention. Furthermore, for non-specialist readers of literature, it is not a single or most valid meaning that is significant. What is significant is the role the text can play in illuminating or extending each reader's

imaginative grasp of human experience. How the text connects with the fledgling readers now is what interests them most; the effects of that connection are likely to be longer lasting and more deeply impressive than what a teacher can tell them about what the text is supposed to mean.

A teacher's knowledge of literature and of penetrating ways of reading it can be employed differently from his or her assuming the role of authoritative interpreter. Instead, the teacher can become a model and a guide for the asking of questions, those questions designed to help young readers make their own meanings with literary texts. The literature classroom becomes a community of interpreters, a place where meanings can be shared and challenged, and not a place where everyone is coerced into finding the "right" interpretation.

Let's visualize this principle in action in a secondary school classroom. Let's say that Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" seemed a likely choice for a tenth grade class, both because it is short and dramatic in its potential impact and because it connects with the class's discussions on the theme of conflict and war. (Thematic teaching of literature seems especially likely to provide a congenial environment for reader-response criticism, though it is not an indispensable condition for it.)

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner
Randall Jarrell

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from the earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

The teacher reads the poem aloud two or three times, the students following the printed text (either projected on a screen or from individual copies). Intervals of silence precede each rereading, perhaps enhanced by the teacher's suggestion, "Try to let the poem create images for you. If the poem seems to draw you into the 'I,' let it happen."

Discussion might start right after these readings, or it could be postponed to the next class period, allowing time for the poem to "work," to penetrate to inner layers of consciousness. When discussion does commence, it may center on the situation in which the I of the poem finds himself. It might in fact start with the question, "Is the I male? How do you know?" Then, "Why is the I giving an account of an event that preceded his death? Who might 'they' be? How does the I seem to feel about his death?" These questions seek to explore students' reactions to the non-literal stance of the poem's narrator, encouraging them to state both that it is not possible to write this poem after death and that the willing reader can make such an act seem possible.

Next, a series of invitations allows students to react to specific words and phrases in the poem. "Since 'State' is capitalized, what does it probably refer to? In what respect is it possible to fall into a State, as opposed to, say, a state of anxiety? Is 'sleep' likely to mean something other than the usual period of evening slumber? How would you paraphrase this first line?

"What are the possible meanings of 'belly' and does 'its' seem more likely to refer to 'State' or 'mother's sleep'? What

do you suppose 'my wet fur' refers to, and what would make it freeze?

"At 30,000 feet above the earth, how might it seem that life is dreamed and who is doing the dreaming? Had the I been asleep, perhaps in some non-literal sense? If 'black flak' is the puffs of smoke caused by guns on other airplanes, who are the 'nightmare fighters' and could they be related to the dream of the preceding line?

"How much time and what events probably intervene between the events of the fourth line and those described in the fifth? What feeling do you now have, at the end of the poem, about the I's state of mind? And how do you feel about what has happened to the I? Are you tempted to draw any conclusion about the significance of what this poem seems to say? Does it have any parallel in your own experience or with anything else you have read?"

A teacher prepared to ask a prolonged series of questions like this is, of course, encouraging a close reading of the text, as New Critics advised, but the readers' attention is constantly drawn to their own ability to make meanings from the text and to their natural need to connect these meanings with their own previous experiences and accumulations of knowledge. As the teacher asks such questions, s/he may occasionally want to inject a possible answer, but s/he will probably suppress any statement that sounds like a definitive interpretation or an outright preference for one student's interpretation. This unwillingness to act as authority will no doubt be bothersome to students

accustomed to the teacher's stance as determiner of correctness or incorrectness. To assume the more ambiguous role, however, is essential to developing students' confidence in their own ability to interpret literary meanings.

None of the questions in the preceding series deals directly with poetic techniques, such as rhythm, or technical terms like metaphor, anapest, and iamb. These matters are clearly less important to the understanding of Jarrell's poem than is the imagery, but they could be included in the questioning. In the discussion arising from feelings the poem arouses, these questions may be appropriate: "Notice that only two words rhyme--froze and hose. Does the rhyme seem accidental, or is there some way that the rhyme emphasizes or encourages a certain emotion in you? Read the poem to yourself several times, paying particular attention to the rhythms of each line. Do you notice any regularity or repetition of accent patterns? Are there certain words or phrases which the rhythm almost forces you to pay special attention to? If so, are they words that seem especially important for creating images and feelings? Or does it seem to you that every word in the poem is equally important? If not, which ones could be changed without altering the effect of the poem on you?"

If technical terms of poetry come up in the discussion that such questions stimulate, they may be somewhat helpful in specifying and explaining how a poem achieves its effects. But the terms themselves need assume no prominence, nor should students conclude that the poem cannot be fully experienced unless the terms are used.

A similar procedure applies to longer works of fiction, always after a full reading of the text. A short story to be discussed by the whole class can be read orally or silently during one class period, preferably preceded by only a brief explanation of why it is being read, such as, "Today, I'd like you to read Ambrose Bierce's 'The Coup de Grace,' a story set on a Civil War battlefield. It deals with three men, one of whom is seriously injured. The story may perplex you, but it may also draw you into the conflicts and feelings that war produces."

No list of vocabulary need be presented on the chalkboard and no list of study questions need anticipate the details of the story. These intrusive pedagogical devices are not part of a naturalistic literary experience and serve more to reduce than to increase students' engagement with the text.

The story should be read completely at least once, though a second reading might well occur before any discussion starts in order to allow time for students to integrate the probable initial shock of reading the story and to begin the process of reflecting on its possible meanings. The literary experience should not be rushed. A teacher might then simply want to invite several students to respond to the question, "Is this story shocking? Why?" Arranging the class into groups of four or five each might be the best setting for registering reactions to the questions, both so that everyone can have a chance to express an oral reaction and to assure somewhat greater comfort in expressing what is likely to be strong feeling.

After fifteen minutes or so of small-group exchange of initial reactions, the teacher may resume as questioner, with a series of questions aimed at eliciting students' perceptions of the relationships among the three characters, the motivation of Captain Madwell for thrusting his sword into Sergeant Holcrow's agony-ridden body, and the many-layered significance of the phrase "the rite of uttermost compassion, the coup de grace." A question designed to connect the actions and motives of this story with students' lives could use The Good Samaritan as a link: "Have you ever wanted to do a Good Samaritan act but recoiled because you thought the act might actually cause harm or compromise you? Should a stroke of mercy be a willed and calculated act?" Since a question like this is calculated to precipitate many specific and personal memories, it can be the bond for a writing assignment that follows from preliminary discussion. As soon as the teacher can feel momentum developing in students' recollections of related experiences, the request to write can be made, perhaps in these words: "We have begun to demonstrate that the situation in 'The Coup de Grace' is applicable not just to soldiers on a Civil War battlefield. Bierce has managed to give us a dramatic sketch of dilemmas that many people face, sometimes involving life and death, other times not involving such drastic consequences. I want you to use the essay form to explain an incident which you experienced directly or which is known to you at second hand. Try to show how that incident may have involved a decision similar to Captain Madwell's. And remember that you are addressing your essays to other students in this class, as well as to students in my other

literature and writing classes. They, as well as I, will be reading and commenting on them."

The early drafting of this essay will preferably occur in the classroom, where the teacher may provide needed assistance and assure concentration. But when the drafts are either complete or far enough along to be sharable, students reassemble in small groups to read them to one another. The teacher provides two or three discussion-focusing questions, such as, "What are two or three words or phrases that have greatest impact on you? Does the writer build the essay so as to clarify for you why the writer thinks those phrases are important? Are there parts of the essay that seem to need elaboration? Do you sense a strong connection between Bierce's story and the writer's experience?"

When each writer has gotten reactions and suggestions for revision from others in the small group, writing continues, either in class or out of class. Students at that point know the deadline for completion and also know that the finished essays will be read in their own class and in others. This knowledge helps to assure a sense of audience for the writing and permits the teacher the opportunity to subject students' responses to still further class discussion, both as to ideas and to techniques of writing. (Portions of some essays or entire essays can be duplicated for this purpose when oral reading may reduce the effectiveness of discussion, or essays may be circulated round robin.)

Because much of the earlier discussion and the intensive period of writing have concentrated on connections between the story and students' own lives, the expected result is a deepening of each student's emotional and intellectual involvement with the story. The in-class drafting process allows opportunity for raising further questions about the significance and interpretation of the story but does not coerce any particular interpretation. The follow-up reading of the essays by many students encourages still further questioning and reflection on what this literary text means. Plurality of meanings is therefore demonstrated but within a context of careful scrutiny and responsible support for interpretations.

When the literary work to be read and interpreted is a novel, new kinds of strategic considerations become important. Because even a short novel like The Red Badge of Courage requires several days of reading time and because students' different reading speeds complicate the scheduling for discussion, the teacher needs to find a tactic for both encouraging and delaying students' expressions of response. The common tactic of reading a few chapters at a time and having discussions after each segment assures that response to the whole novel will be distorted. Such discussions force readers into premature formulation; they are unable to feel the cumulative, highly personal building of impressions that is the central experience of reading a novel.

Assuming the usual diversity of reading speeds in a high school class, the teacher might well use small groups prominently to promote the reading process. These groups of four or five

students each can have the single assignment of reading the book straight through, with a deadline for completion of the first reading. Students who read very slowly can get assistance from a faster reader in the group, someone who will read some sections orally to supplement the slower reader's own reading efforts. Or, a tape recorded reading of the novel might be available. Besides keeping up the pace of reading, the group can have informal discussions among themselves that can serve several purposes: to clarify details of the action that some readers may not have grasped in their individual reading; to paraphrase certain sections that may seem especially important to the story line; to react initially to the characters' actions, trying to discern and interpret motives and reactions. Since these discussions are not teacher-led and are governed in duration by available class time and the completion deadline, they are unlikely to seem intrusive in the reading process. And certainly, no quizzes or other artificial inducements to doing the reading should be used by the teacher. (If this non-coercive strategy sounds idealistic, given the reluctance of some high school students to do what is assigned, my response is that the teacher's refusal to coerce the reading of literature is preferable, in the long run, because it eliminates the stigma of reading simply to pass a test. Test-passing is not a valid goal for novice readers of literature.)

After introducing The Red Badge of Courage as the most famous novel about the Civil War, the teacher might also say that the novel is not written like a history of that war. "It is sub-

titled 'An Episode of the American Civil War'; furthermore, the author first considered titling the book 'Private Fleming: His Various Battles.' So, we'll be reading a book with one central character, a young man who has just enlisted on the Union side in the American Civil War. His name is Henry Fleming; he is still very young; he has defied his mother's wishes by enlisting to fight in a cause that consumed American society in the early 1860's. Like "The Coup de Grace,' this story can draw you into the feelings of the characters, and it may raise questions in your mind about how war affects the participants."

When the first reading of the novel has been completed by everyone, class discussion can begin. To stress that s/he wants students' responses to dominate these discussions, the teacher can have selected several passages to serve as successive focal points, with a guiding question or two to go with each. For example, "The last sentence of the novel refers to the sun: 'Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds.' By the time you got to that sentence, you had participated with Henry Fleming in a lot of conflicting reactions to the battle. At the end of the novel, does he seem to have made up his mind how he really feels about being in the war? How do you feel about his being in the war? Did you feel the same way throughout the book?" Not only is this set of questions likely to precipitate an examination of what may be the central purpose of the novel (and, of course, critics do not agree about what the central purpose is); it may also cause students to commit themselves about whether the ending is optimistic, pessimistic, or ironic. All of these interpretations

are possible; discussion of support for each should be extremely productive so far as each reader's interaction with the novel is concerned. Note also that starting discussion about the end of the novel demonstrates the necessity of making an interpretation of the novel based on the whole.

Another question focus: "At the end of Chapter IX, this sentence occurs: 'The red sun was pasted in the sky like a fierce wafer.' Since we do not normally think of the sun as pasted in the sky nor do we usually speak of wafers as fierce, this sentence must have some unusual effect. How do you see it as fitting with the state of mind of Henry Fleming at that point in the novel? Is its possible meaning there the same as the meaning associated with the sun at the end of the novel? Why do you think those images might be more than just unimportant descriptions of the scene in the novel?"

A set of questions focused on Fleming's changes in attitude toward war and the readers' reactions to these changes seems essential to probing the book. "Early in Chapter IX, the narrator says Fleming 'wished that he, too, had a wound, a little red badge of courage.' That was before the raging soldier hit Fleming over the head with his rifle (in Chapter XII). Did that head wound serve him well as a badge of courage? What do you perceive as the dilemma that that incident puts him in for the rest of the novel? What are some of the other ways that he could have handled the aftermath of the incident?" These questions will cause attention of the readers to range widely over the whole novel, putting pieces together, assessing their

significance, and articulating alternatives to behavior presented in the novel.

Since Crane's impressionistic techniques of writing are so noteworthy and are so likely to attract almost any reader's attention, other questions might focus on imagery and language. "Did you notice how often Crane referred to animals, especially to war as a monster? Skim the novel to find several examples, and let's read them again aloud. Are the feelings they arouse in you entirely negative? What other comparisons can you think of for war (e.g., ocean tide, game, quest, theater)? When did you get the most vivid impressions of how it feels to be in a battle setting? Did the animal images help or hinder your feeling of participation?" The intent of these questions is to encourage attention and reaction to the sensuous texture of the language and to look for connections between language and the feelings aroued in readers. Since these feelings will not all be the same and will be expressed in different ways, the discussion can demonstrate that varying perceptions are expected. It may also demonstrate that Crane was consciously using a type of imagery, probably with the intent of shaping the reader's emotional response. The examination of alternative images may also raise the issue of trite ways of thinking and speaking about war, language that creates hackneyed images rather than fresh ones.

Writing should begin sometime before the discussion lags or becomes repetitive. The assignment should be stated so that students can build on or depart from the discussion, not simply reprocess it. Possibilities: "Pick out one question or statement from the novel that resembles a dilemma you have faced

yourself, such as, 'How do you know you won't run when the time comes?' (Chapter II), or, 'He had a conviction that he would soon feel in his sore heart the barbed missiles of ridicule.' (Chapter XIII) In the form of a story, a letter to a friend, or an essay, try to show how you and the character in the novel faced a similar dilemma." Or, "Imagine Henry Fleming in conversation with his mother after he leaves service in the Union Army. What will he tell her, and what responses will she make? Write in dialogue."

The writing that results from topics like these will go through the same stages of drafting, sharing, and revising as those suggested for a short story. Since the time spent on the novel will have been greater, however, the writing about the novel may seem to take on greater significance. The teacher may want to encourage fuller probing of students' interpretations, more extended efforts to draw extensively from the text and to elaborate on responses. Offering such form options as a story or a letter to a friend may not explicitly suggest more concentrated or prolonged effort, though they may well engage the imagination in the writing with an intensity different from that ordinarily associated with the essay.

The sharing of finished stories, letters, essays, and dialogues should also serve as a climax of the novel-reading experience and probably as a means for synthesizing it--not to vote on the best interpretation but to savor the variety of interpretation.

For the teacher who practices a commitment to reader-response criticism, the relationships both to familiar literary texts and to students will undergo subtle changes. Those texts will be constantly recreated--always the same words but never the same characters or the same implications of those characters' actions. As successive students add their unique oral and written responses, which blend their own experiences with life outside books and texts they have never read before, the teacher may be constantly surprised. The text stays fresh, just as each class is a little different from the previous one. Students continue to amaze because each sees the text in a somewhat different way.

The types and roles of teacher-devised questions assume new significance. Questions designed to promote and extend comprehension are no less important than they have been for the teacher/authority, but they are always framed as probes, as starters for exploration rather than as occasions for mere recall or for testing attentiveness. And these questions aimed toward comprehension merge and interweave with questions that ask for first-person evaluation, for comparison with experience of other literary texts and with extra-literary experience. Further, such questions are not saved for the later stages of discussion but have their proper place throughout, the teacher demonstrating that a normal literary experience is not an escape from reality but a penetration of it. Personal mneanings can suffuse every line or every chapter.

The teacher's armament of technical literary terms is likely to seem more like a bundle of little gifts--trinkets or lagniappe

offered where they will seem to sharpen a perception, categorize an observation, give a cachet of expertness to understanding. Their appropriateness cannot be wholly predetermined nor will their usefulness be measurable by pencil and paper tests. If the terms have truly served their proper pedagogical purpose, they will enter subsequent conversations about literature with almost as much naturalness as will names of characters and places. The metalanguage of literature will not seem arcane.

And this commitment to nourishing each reader's response to literature will, of course, lead to pluralism of meanings. Does pluralism in this realm amount to anarchy? Perhaps it will seem so to a teacher who has principled resistance to overtly pronouncing on the rightness of interpretation. But unless that teacher carries reticence to an extreme--never venturing his or her own interpretation, never challenging a student's interpretation, never attempting to evaluate the plausibility of a student's judgment--anarchy certainly need not be the outcome. Instead, what the teacher can demonstrate is the process of making a text into a classic: gathering and sifting the cumulative judgments of many readers, finally determining that a text has a continuing relevance, earned admiration, a right to life in imagination.

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[1] After the New Criticism, by Frank Lentricchia (University of Chicago Press, 1980) traces some of the major critical movements of the past twenty years.

Two collections of essays that can be classified as reader-response critical theory are Reader-Response Criticism; From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, edited by Jane P. Tompkins (Johns Hopkins Press, 1980) and The Reader in the Text; Essays on Audience and Interpretation, edited by Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton University Press, 1980).